

Italian-American History Exhibit Concerns Intersections of Class and Ethnicity

Review by Marc Di Paolo

In an effort to remind contemporary Italians – and those outside of the community – of the ethnic community’s historic ties to labor activism and progressive politics, Dr. Michele Fazio has assembled and annotated an exhibit of official government propaganda photographs designed to present a sanitized, ‘patriotic’ portrait of her own, *actually-quite-radical* family.

The exhibit, ‘A Neglected Legacy: Reclaiming a Radical Past,’ is on display in the American Labor Museum/Botto House National Landmark, in Haledon, New Jersey, from May 1st through August 24th, 2019. It will then open at the Lawrence Heritage State Park & Visitor Center, Lawrence, MA from Oct. 1 - Oct. 31, 2019 to celebrate Italian American History month. A public lecture is scheduled for Oct. 6.

‘A Neglected Legacy: Reclaiming a Radical Past’ features photographs from 1943 that tell the story of the integration of first-generation Italian immigrants into becoming fully-fledged Americans. The exhibit also tells the hidden history of two brothers, Raimondo and Vincenzo Fazio, who were engaged in the Italian American Left’s fight for social justice during the early 20th century U.S. labor movement. According to Michele Fazio, ‘This family story challenges the dominant narratives that have come to define U.S. history and encourages a reconsideration of the past, calling into question not only how we understand immigration and activism today but, ultimately what is both gained and lost in the process of becoming American.’



Taken in January 1943, this photograph, one of thousands produced by the Farm Security Administration and the Office of War Information for publication in various media outlets nationwide and overseas to portray “real” Americans and their everyday lives, features members of the Fazio family eating dinner. A recreation of this photograph serves as the exhibit’s focal point and is accompanied by other images from the Library of Congress’ FSA-OWI digital collection.

Fazio unveiled the exhibit at the American Labor Museum as a part of its annual May Day Festival. During the exhibit-opening presentation, Fazio revealed connections between her family history and archival records leading up to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Lawrence Strike of 1912. One attendee remarked upon their own families’ legacy of workers’

rights activism, while another expressed regret over not recording their family history before elders had passed.

Fazio, Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of Gender Studies Minor at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and former president of the Working-Class Studies Association, created the exhibit to ask the critical question: What is the price of enculturation? As Jennifer Guglielmo and Thomas A. Guglielmo have written¹, the Italian-American community writ large has sacrificed much of its historic solidarity with marginalized groups – both working-class and immigrant communities – in its pursuit of middle-class respectability and a claim to American ‘whiteness.’ To help facilitate this transformation, and move from the political left to the right, contemporary Italian-Americans have arguably embraced selective amnesia about the history of their own community in the United States. Fazio hopes that this slice of her personal history, placed within a broader social and political context and explicated in this exhibit, will help those who view it to consider the nature of this transformation and contemplate its ramifications.

‘A Neglected Legacy’ was previously on display at the Old Colony History Museum in Taunton, MA, from July 2018 through March 2019.

Reviewer Bio

Marc Di Paolo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Language & Literature at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. He is the author of *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, McFarland & Company, 2011, *Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones*, State University of New York Press, 2018 and the editor of *Working-Class Comic Book Heroes: Class Conflict and Populist Politics in Comics*, University Press of Mississippi, 2018

¹ See their chapters in Guglielmo, J., Salerno, S. 2012, (eds), *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America*, Routledge, New York.